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Senator raps CIA findings in Israeli attack on Liberty

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The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been called on to give a "complete clarification" of its findings in the controversial "Liberty" affair of 1967 in which Israeli planes attacked an American communications ship.

In a tough letter to CIA Director Stansfield Turner, U.S. Sen. James Abourezk (D) of South Dakota questioned a CIA analysis — produced only five days after the June 8, 1967, incident — which called the attack accidental. The CIA analysis was written before a court of inquiry could be conducted and before extensive interviews of witnesses and survivors could be carried out.

The controversy over the attack on the USS Liberty once again made headlines recently when the American Palestine Committee — a privately funded group based in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which holds that Palestinians have been treated unjustly — published three intelligence reports received by the CIA after its initial analysis of the attack was made. Those reports, obtained by the committee through freedom-of-information actions, indicated that the attack on the Liberty was deliberate.

Senator Abourezk, who is of Lebanese origin and one of the few members of Congress who consistently espouses Arab interests, said in his letter that the CIA had given the American Palestine Committee and its Washington attorney assurances that CIA files contained nothing which would discredit the reports suggesting that the Israeli attack was deliberate. Yet, he pointed out, within hours of the publication of the three documents in the New York Times on Sept. 19, Admiral Turner said in a television interview that the attack had been an honest mistake.

Senator Abourezk's office said that a CIA official had informed an aide to the Senator that an answer to the Senator's letter might be forthcoming by the end of this week.

One of the three CIA documents published by the American Palestine Committee quoted unnamed sources as saying in late 1967 that Moshe Dayan, now Israeli Foreign Minister and then Defense Minister, personally ordered the attack on the Liberty.

Foreign Minister Dayan, visiting Washington in September when the CIA reports were published, reiterated his earlier denial that the attack had been deliberate.

According to some sources, the only plausible explanation for the attack came in two Penthouse magazine reports written last year by British journalist Anthony Pearson. Mr. Pearson, who is soon to publish a book on the subject, contended that the combined air and sea assault on the Liberty, in which 34 men were killed and 164 wounded, was intended to prevent the Liberty from reporting that Israeli forces had advanced beyond the limits of a secret agreement reached between the United States and Israel before the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967.

According to Mr. Pearson's reports, the Americans had learned that Jordan's King Hussein was encouraged to fight beyond the containment plan by a deliberate "cooking" of his communications by the Israelis, who had succeeded in breaking Arab codes and were altering messages between the Arab forces. Mr. Pearson said that on June 8, only three days away from their final objectives, the Israeli leaders feared that the continued presence of the Liberty, monitoring their activities, might wreck their plans.

Survivors of the attack on the Liberty have pointed out that the ship was in international waters and properly marked by a large flag on its masthead and English letters on its stern. Yet the Israelis claimed that despite six hours of surveillance of the communications ship in bright sunshine by their reconnaissance planes prior to the attack, they had mistaken it for an Egyptian tanker, a tanker which at that time was in port at Alexandria, Egypt.